

Stagnation of Subnational Diplomacy in the Hometown of the President: A Critique of Local Leadership and the International Role of Pacitan Regency

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Abstract: The involvement of national political figures in local governance often creates a dual dynamic in efforts to develop subnational diplomacy. Pacitan Regency, known for its close ties to a former president of the Republic of Indonesia originating from the region, is led by a local head of government who remains affiliated with elite national networks. This presents an illustrative case of limitations in leveraging international cooperation opportunities, such as the lack of formal sister city partnerships, minimal participation in global forums, and the absence of targeted strategies to attract foreign collaboration. Despite holding strong symbolic value, the region has yet to demonstrate success in building meaningful international partnerships. This study examines the condition of Pacitan's subnational diplomacy by analyzing local political influence, symbolic power structures, and the interaction between local government and global actors. Using a qualitative approach and literature review, this article demonstrates that political symbolism, when not followed by institutional performance, tends to weaken a region's diplomatic capacity. Dependence on symbolic status leads to a neglect of potential international cooperation and minimal public engagement in diplomacy.

Keywords: Good Governance, International Networks, Local Leadership, Political Symbolism, Subnational Diplomacy

Introduction

Pacitan Regency in East Java holds strong symbolic value in Indonesian politics due to its association with a former president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) who hails from this region. The current regent, Indrata Nur Bayuaji, is part of the extended family of SBY and is also a member of the Democratic Party. This connection reinforces the public perception that policymaking in Pacitan is still influenced by legacy political structures that emphasize symbolism and offer limited space for progressive international engagement. Although the regency carries significant political branding, it has

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not taken proactive steps to establish meaningful international relations. This is a critical issue in the era of regional autonomy, where each region is expected to build global linkages to support local development.

The political heritage in Pacitan has significantly influenced the approach to governance, where the emphasis on symbolic legacy seems to overshadow the pursuit of strategic modernization. In spite of its inherent natural beauty, coastal accessibility, and rich cultural assets, the region finds itself excluded from significant international cooperation platforms or bilateral endeavors. This underutilization stands in stark contrast to comparable regencies like Banyuwangi and Trenggalek, which have proactively participated in city diplomacy, fostered environmental collaborations, and promoted international tourism (Lecours. A, 2016; Rodrigo Tavares, 2016). Moreover, Pacitan's development planning documents rarely include external partnerships as a core objective, indicating a limited diplomatic vision within its institutional framework (Bappeda, 2021).

The circumstances raise important considerations regarding the role of symbolic political capital. While it can significantly impact electoral outcomes and shape national perceptions, its effectiveness may be limited for subnational governments if it is not paired with administrative competence and policies that are outward-focused. This paper posits that the current diplomatic stagnation in Pacitan stems from an imbalance between political symbolism and practical internationalism, necessitating a thorough analysis through the frameworks of international relations and local governance (OECD, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2022).

The importance of local governments in influencing international relations has grown in the age of decentralization, particularly in countries such as Indonesia, which have undergone significant political and administrative changes. Since the implementation of regional autonomy in 2001, regencies and cities throughout Indonesia have been entrusted with more authority to create external relations, manage economic resources, and represent their regions in transnational networks (Hofman & Kaiser, 2006). This political decentralization opened avenues for what is widely referred to as subnational diplomacy, wherein local actors no longer serve merely as executors of central government policy but begin to act as international players in their own right (Lecours. A, 2016; Rodrigo Tavares, 2016).

However, the degree to which these opportunities have been utilized varies considerably. While some cities like Surabaya, Banyuwangi, and Makassar have successfully initiated international cooperation in areas ranging from smart city infrastructure to climate adaptation and cultural exchanges (Winarno. D, 2021), other regencies remain passive and disengaged due to the lack of political will, institutional adaptability, and the quality of leadership. In districts dominated by dynastic or oligarchic politics, where symbolic legitimacy overshadows performance-based governance, the internationalization of local policy tends to stagnate (Hadiz, 2010; Robison.R, 2004). Pacitan Regency, with its entrenched

association with national elite families and its self-branding as “The President’s Town,” exemplifies this challenge.

Despite having coastal geographic advantages, natural tourism potential, and a symbolic national identity, Pacitan has taken little initiative in seeking international partnership. The lack of sister-city relationships, participation in global city networks (such as UCLG-ASPAC or ICLEI), and efforts to engage foreign universities, NGOs, or diaspora communities exemplifies a larger phenomenon of symbolic paralysis in which historical narratives are preserved at the expense of progress. Instead of acting as a proactive paradiplomatic actor, the regency remains inward-looking and stagnant, risking long-term marginalization in an increasingly globalized subnational scene (Galtung, 1984; Saskia Sassen, 2005).

This paper seeks to explore the roots of this stagnation by examining the political, bureaucratic, and civic constraints that prevent Pacitan from becoming a globally engaged local government. It combines critical literature from international relations, political sociology, and governance studies to build a conceptual framework that explains how subnational diplomacy can fail in the presence of symbolic leadership, bureaucratic inertia, and civic disengagement. Using Pacitan as a case study, the analysis offers not only a localized critique but also broader implications for understanding how post-authoritarian societies manage or fail to manage their global integration at the local level. Furthermore, this study formulates recommendations to reposition Pacitan as a more competent and forward-looking regional actor, capable of leveraging its symbolic capital into substantive diplomatic performance.

This study was conducted with full respect and appreciation for the figures mentioned throughout the analysis, particularly former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and family in political field in Indonesia, whose legacy continues to shape the identity of Pacitan Regency. The author does not intend to discredit any individuals or institutions. Instead, this research is motivated by a commitment to International Relations scholarship and by concern for regional development. Through critical analysis, this paper seeks to offer constructive recommendations to the Pacitan local government, including its leadership and stakeholders, to better respond to the aspirations, needs, and welfare of the people of Pacitan.

Research Methods

This research employs a qualitative-descriptive method through document analysis, literature review, and comparative case study. Key sources include Pacitan’s medium-term development plans (RPJMD), media reports, and comparative analysis with more internationally active regencies such as Banyuwangi and Trenggalek.

In addition to document reviews, this study incorporates interviews and expert commentary from regional planning bodies and local governance scholars to add contextual understanding. The triangulation of these methods aims to

strengthen the validity of the research and provide a multi-dimensional view of Pacitan's diplomatic inertia.

Research and Discussion Results

The examination of Pacitan Regency's stagnation in subnational diplomacy cannot be separated from its political, institutional, and cultural context. Situated in the southern coastal region of East Java, Pacitan possesses strategic geographical features, symbolic political heritage, and environmental potential. However, despite these advantages, it has not materialized into an active and recognized actor in international cooperation networks. The lack of strategic vision, bureaucratic innovation, and independent leadership contributes to what may be termed a "symbolic paralysis," a condition where the weight of legacy and prestige becomes a burden rather than a launchpad.

This section critically dissects the root causes behind Pacitan's underperformance in the international arena by connecting empirical realities with theoretical insights. The analysis engages three intersecting domains: symbolic leadership and legitimacy, diplomatic inaction and missed opportunities, and governance failures within the local institutional ecosystem.

Political Symbolism and Leadership Representation

Leadership in Pacitan tends to rely heavily on symbolic ties with national elites. Regent Indrata Nur Bayuaji, the nephew of former President SBY, represents a dynastic political model that reinforces Pacitan's identity as a "city of the president." This reflects how the Democratic Party's influence reinforces symbolic rather than transformative local policy directions. While historical affiliations are emphasized in public narratives, such leadership has not translated into innovative policies such as targeted international investment initiatives, academic or cultural exchange programs, or the development of digital diplomacy platforms or substantial international cooperation (Tempo, 2021).

Pacitan's classification as "Kota Presiden" (The President's Town), derived from its status as President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's hometown, has operated as more of a symbolic shield than a strategic advantage. While this association helped secure central financing and elite attention in the early years after decentralization, its overreliance has hampered the formation of other narratives over time. The regent, Indrata Nur Bayuaji, who is part of SBY's extended family and a member of the Democratic Party (Partai Demokrat), continues to draw legitimacy from this tradition rather than forging a new vision of global-local reform.

Studies on dynastic politics in Southeast Asia (Aspinal, et al., 2016; Winters, 2011) have shown that symbolic legitimacy, when not accompanied by performance legitimacy, leads to stagnation, risk-aversion, and resistance to reform. In Pacitan, this manifests in the absence of leadership-driven initiatives to promote the region internationally. There is no evidence-based policy for

international branding, trade exposure, or cultural diplomacy. The region has never hosted international festivals, study tours, or sister-city delegations, all common entry points into paradiplomacy used by cities like Solo and Denpasar, in which these agendas would prove or become the bare-minimum of evidences that some regencies has done international cooperations.

In contrast, districts like Banyuwangi have used their local identity not only as a cultural asset but also as a diplomatic tool to invite collaborations with international stakeholders. Pacitan, however, has largely remained passive in this regard, with its leadership focusing more on preserving political alignment rather than expanding institutional capability.

Leadership in the Pacific region is still heavily influenced by political symbols rather than innovation. The dependence on family ties, particularly with former President SBY, lends legitimacy that is not based on performance. In this setting, political legitimacy is inherited rather than earned, reducing the possibilities for reform and constructive engagement in international diplomacy.

Comparative studies show that regions like Surabaya, under the leadership of Tri Rismaharini, broke free from political dynasties and successfully promoted city diplomacy, notably with Germany and the Netherlands in smart city and waste management cooperation (Winarno. D, 2021). This highlights that political independence can significantly improve international visibility and functional cooperation.

Research by Aspinall & Greg Fealy, (2003) warns that dynastic politics in Indonesia often lead to policy stagnation, limited civic participation, and shallow democratic consolidation. In Pacitan's case, while the narrative of being "Kota Presiden" (President's City) or "Kota Kelahiran Presiden ke-6 Indonesia" (The Birthplace of Indonesian 6th President) enhances symbolic pride, it rarely translates into real political leverage abroad. The absence of outward-looking leadership stifles creativity in building global connections, especially with mid-sized cities in Southeast Asia that share coastal and environmental similarities.

Limited Diplomatic Initiative

Geographically, Pacitan is endowed with features that could easily place it on international agendas. Its karst landscapes, coastal biodiversity, and cultural heritage are assets that align with global frameworks such as UNESCO Global Geoparks or eco-tourism-based development. For example, regions like Gunungkidul and Banyuwangi have successfully converted similar natural capital into international recognition and funding streams through partnerships with Germany (via GIZ/Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) and Japan (via JICA). Yet, Pacitan has failed to even register interest or initiate proposals in similar venues.

According to data from Bappeda, (2022), none of the local government's annual development plans explicitly include targets or indicators related to international partnerships. This absence signifies a lack of policy imagination, a term used by Galtung, (1984) to describe the inability of local actors to envision

development beyond national boundaries. Such short-sightedness is not merely a bureaucratic flaw; it reflects a deeper cultural and institutional conditioning shaped by years of inherited leadership patterns and political comfort zones.

Participation in transnational municipal networks has been an important driver for Asian local governments seeking soft power and money. Networks like UCLG-ASPAC (United Cities and Local Governments Asia-Pacific), ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), and CITYNET provide platforms for small to medium-sized cities to propose proposals, receive training, and collaborate on policy solutions with peer towns throughout the world.

A review of ICLEI membership in 2022 shows that more than 30 secondary cities in Indonesia, including Palembang, Semarang, and Banjarmasin, have joined at least one network. These cities benefit from thematic initiatives including climate action, disaster risk reduction, and smart mobility. Pacitan, with its high vulnerability to tsunamis and environmental deterioration, fits the criteria of a potential city for such projects, yet it remains absent from all known regional city networks.

The failure to engage these platforms is not a matter of exclusion by others, but a failure of initiative. Interviews with former Ministry of Home Affairs officials (Kompas, 2022) confirm that several invitations were extended to Pacitan during national coordination meetings, but the regency declined or did not follow up. This behavior indicates not only administrative apathy but a deeper governance issue: the lack of outward-oriented institutional culture.

Compared to other regencies in East Java, Pacitan appears inactive in forming official international collaborations. Banyuwangi has forged cultural and tourism partnerships with countries like Australia and Japan, while Trenggalek has cooperated with South Korea in agricultural technology. Pacitan, however, has not pursued similar diplomatic opportunities (Kompas, 2023).

Pacitan's minimal diplomatic initiatives are the result of a lack of vision and institutional frameworks. For example, although Trenggalek and Banyuwangi have interacted with international organizations through investment fairs, climate-focused cooperation, and technology transfer, Pacitan has no documented multilateral or bilateral interaction beyond ceremonial events.

International institutions like UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) and ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability) offer small cities in Asia access to training, funding, and peer knowledge. Cities in the Philippines and Vietnam with similar coastal profiles have joined ICLEI to gain technical assistance for disaster preparedness and environmental management issue in Pacitan, prone to tsunami risks, has failed to address diplomatically.

Data from the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN, 2022) demonstrates that districts like Makassar and Semarang attracted international urban investment after joining cross-border city platforms. Pacitan has yet to explore such low-cost, high-impact opportunities. This signals not just inaction, but a deeper lack of understanding of city diplomacy's strategic potential.

Bureaucratic Loyalty and Lack of Reform

Pacitan's bureaucracy remains largely traditional and loyalty-driven, often placing loyalty to political lineage above merit. This has resulted in missed opportunities for external engagement such as the absence of formal sister city programs or bilateral collaborations which remain untapped due to lack of proactive bureaucratic leadership, prioritizing political allegiances over professional merit. This hinders internal governmental efforts to establish strategic international networks. Opportunities such as joining global forums like UCLG ASPAC have yet to be seized (Detik, 2023).

The structure and ethos of Pacitan's bureaucracy further compound its diplomatic stagnation. Despite decentralization reforms initiated in the early 2000s, many regencies, particularly those under symbolic leadership have maintained a culture of loyalty over performance (Heather Sutherland, 1979). Research by the (World Bank, 2007, 2018) and (KPK, 2020) on local governance demonstrates that over 60% of regency appointments in Indonesia still follow informal patronage networks.

Senior bureaucratic jobs in the Pacific are frequently held by individuals with long-standing political family ties rather than technocratic credentials. This limits institutional agility and discourages young professionals from entering public service. No local diplomacy office has a structured mechanism in place to provide language training, international proposal writing, or global project management basic capabilities. In contrast, regions like Trenggalek and Banyuwangi have aggressively sent mid-level officials to train at GIZ, KOICA, and even UNDP-sponsored events in Bangkok and Singapore.

This lack of exposure creates a vicious cycle of institutional introversion, where opportunities are either ignored or misunderstood by Pacitan's government. Policy documents reviewed from 2018–2022 show minimal references to external funding sources beyond national budget allocations (DAK or APBN), suggesting an almost total reliance on internal channels.

Pacitan's administrative system is known for strong patronage and family loyalty. A governance report from KemenPAN-RB in 2021 shows that Pacitan performs worse than the average in East Java when it comes to innovating public services and being open.

The absence of bureaucratic reform, especially in departments handling development, culture, and investment, hinders coordination with foreign actors. In contrast, regencies like Kulon Progo and Gunungkidul in Yogyakarta have restructured their agencies to include international liaison offices or foreign affairs desks, which has enabled effective coordination with NGOs and donor agencies from Europe and Japan.

Meritocratic appointments and capacity-building programs, such as those supported by GIZ, have been successful in professionalizing local bureaucracy in Central Java. Pacitan's failure to join similar schemes is a missed opportunity to modernize governance and internationalize development.

Social Impact and Intellectual Migration

The absence of a forward-looking diplomatic strategy restricts international partnership-driven job creation. Consequently, many young and educated residents migrate in search of better opportunities elsewhere (Docquier et al., 2009; Saskia Sassen, 2005). Limited avenues for public participation in policymaking have deepened local youth disengagement and contributed to growing development inequality (UNDP, 2021a).

The stagnation in Pacitan's international role has measurable social consequences. According to BPS in Pacitan, youth migration to Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and even Malaysia and Taiwan are steadily increasing. The limited presence of innovation hubs, foreign-funded educational exchanges, or start-up incentives pushes young professionals to look elsewhere for career and academic opportunities (BPS.Pacitan, 2022).

Data from the IOM demonstrates that 15% of Indonesian migrant workers from East Java are from rural regencies like Pacitan. Yet, unlike Wonosobo or Kediri, Pacitan has no reintegration program for returning diaspora, nor does it promote them as cultural or economic envoys for the region abroad (IOM, 2021).

A study by Anwar finds that inclusive regional diplomacy where youth and diaspora are systematically involved can significantly increase foreign investor confidence and lead to knowledge transfer. Pacitan's failure to tap into this potential reinforces the perception of it being inward-looking and resistant to change (Anwar.S, 2020).

Perhaps the saddest outcome of Pacitan's inward-looking governance is its impact on civic life and youth engagement. Without opportunities for local youth to participate in global initiatives like Model UN programs, ASEAN youth councils, or digital diplomacy projects, the region suffers from (Wikan, 1998) terms "social de-activation." The brightest students from Pacitan's schools and colleges often leave for Yogyakarta, Surabaya, or overseas and rarely return, citing a lack of intellectual space, innovation infrastructure, and political inclusion.

Data from BPS.Pacitan, (2022) indicates a rising trend of outmigration among the 18–35 age group, particularly those with higher education. A parallel study by IOM, (2021). demonstrates that among East Java's rural regencies, Pacitan ranks among the top five in terms of undocumented labor migration to Malaysia and Taiwan a clear signal of local economic and aspirational failure.

Diaspora, which could have become a tool for public diplomacy, has been left unengaged. While other regions like Wonosobo and Blitar have hosted diaspora summits or established digital returnee platforms, Pacitan does not even maintain a diaspora registry. The local government's reluctance to tap into the soft power of its overseas population is a missed opportunity with long-term consequences.

A System in Suspension

These realities point to a regency caught in a paradox: politically rich in symbolism but institutionally poor in strategy. The legacy of national leadership, instead of empowering future growth, has crystallized into a myth that overshadows the urgent need for innovation and reform.

The findings in this chapter do not seek to condemn but to warn that symbolic prestige is perishable. Without concrete transformation in leadership orientation, bureaucratic competence, and civic participation, Pacitan risks being permanently excluded from regional and global policy ecosystems not by force, but by its own inertia.

The findings in this chapter reveal a multidimensional stagnation in Pacitan's subnational diplomacy. Despite having symbolic national capital as the hometown of a former president, the regency has not evolved into a proactive international actor. This stagnation stems from a persistent convergence of political symbolism, weak bureaucratic responsiveness, and limited civic engagement.

As discussed earlier, symbolic leadership particularly when sustained through dynastic legitimacy often lacks the drive for institutional transformation (Winters, 2011). Pacitan's current leadership inherits political capital, but this has not been followed by policy innovation or external outreach. Unlike more dynamic districts such as Banyuwangi, which has gained global visibility through climate cooperation and cultural diplomacy, Pacitan remains stuck in performative governance.

The absence of formal diplomatic frameworks or international cooperation units reflects the local government's failure to internalize the logic of paradiplomacy (Rodrigo Tavares, 2016). The regency's non-participation in international city networks like UCLG-ASPAC or ICLEI further underscores a lack of vision. In contexts where global-local collaboration is key to accessing funding and influence, this isolation is costly.

Further exacerbating this stagnation is a bureaucratic culture still shaped by loyalty rather than merit. As noted by Hadiz, (2010), Indonesia's post-authoritarian local politics often reinforce informal patronage rather than formal institutional competence. In Pacitan, this culture has hindered the creation of a skilled civil service capable of pursuing global partnerships or development diplomacy.

Finally, the implications for youth and civil society are significant. Data demonstrates an outmigration trend among educated youth, as local governance offers few opportunities for innovation, inclusion, or international participation. With diaspora left untapped and young voices ignored, Pacitan continues to lose not only human capital but also its chance to build diplomatic soft power through its people (Saskia Sassen, 2005)

In conclusion, Pacitan's stagnation in subnational diplomacy is not due to structural constraints, but rather the absence of political will and strategic leadership. Change will require more than reforms it will require a shift in mindset at every level of governance.

Identified Weaknesses and Areas for Improvement

a. Limited Empirical Evidence

While the article mentions RPJMD and anecdotal sources, it lacks strong empirical backing such as data on poverty, youth migration, unemployment, or budget allocation for foreign partnerships. Incorporating these indicators would support the argument for stagnation more convincingly (Kusumasari.B, 2012).

b. Absence of Non-Government Actors

The journal centers its analysis almost entirely on local government leadership, without discussing how civil society, diaspora, universities, or MSMEs could play a role in local diplomacy. This weakens the multidimensional view needed in subnational international relations (OECD, 2019).

c. Underdeveloped Political Party Analysis

While the role of a dominant political party is implied, the paper does not deeply examine how party structures or internal networks contribute to the bureaucratic stagnation or elite patronage. More specific examples or mechanisms of party-based gatekeeping would strengthen the critique (Hadiz, 2013).

Substantive Critique and Conceptual Gaps

Although the article successfully highlights the symbolic burden of Pacitan as “the City of the President,” it does not offer clear alternative pathways or innovations that the local government could pursue. Including cases of successful paradiplomacy would make the critique more constructive and actionable (Arfianto.Y, 2023).

Alternatives for Subnational Diplomacy

a. Banyuwangi Model

A powerful example of strong leadership, strategic branding, and diaspora diplomacy. Banyuwangi partnered with ASEAN, European Union cities, and creative economy actors, transforming itself into an inclusive and internationally connected regency.

b. Yogyakarta Model

Through city branding and cultural diplomacy, Yogyakarta engages globally via platforms like UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments), demonstrating that symbolic authority can be converted into functional global cooperation.

c. West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) Model

Despite limited institutional capacity, NTB aligns its regional plans with climate diplomacy, circular economy goals, and partnerships with international green agencies a rare example of successful green paradiplomacy (UNDP, 2021b).

d. Sister City Cooperation Model

One concrete strategy that Pacitan could pursue is initiating a sister city agreement with a foreign locality that shares similar geographic, cultural, or economic features. Sister city diplomacy offers a low-cost, high-impact pathway for local governments to expand international engagement through cultural exchange, education programs, and sustainable development collaborations.

For instance, Surabaya's partnership with Kitakyushu in Japan has fostered cooperation in waste management, education, and urban planning. Likewise, Yogyakarta's ties with Kyoto have bolstered cultural and academic exchanges, reflecting the power of symbolic cities engaging on shared heritage platforms. These models can be adapted to Pacitan's coastal identity, suggesting partnerships with cities in Japan, South Korea, or fellow ASEAN member states focused on maritime sustainability, disaster resilience, or community-based tourism.

Sister city diplomacy also aligns with global governance frameworks that encourage city-level involvement in climate action, intercultural dialogue, and inclusive innovation (OECD, 2019). Establishing such partnerships could serve as a gateway for broader subnational diplomacy, repositioning Pacitan as a more active international player while fostering local pride and opportunity.

Conclusion

The stagnation of Pacitan Regency in the realm of subnational diplomacy cannot be separated from structural, political, and institutional limitations that have gone unaddressed for years. This paper has shown that despite holding symbolic national relevance, Pacitan lacks the internal reforms and leadership innovation necessary to transform that symbolism into real international agency.

Instead of acting as an active subnational diplomatic actor, Pacitan has remained passive heavily dependent on historical legacies and elite affiliation. The absence of institutional mechanisms, coupled with a closed bureaucratic culture and limited youth engagement, has stalled opportunities for meaningful international cooperation.

This conclusion is grounded in the interaction of three theoretical frameworks. Subnational Diplomacy reveals the missed chances to engage in international networks; Elite Politics explains the dominance of symbolic legitimacy over performance-based leadership; and Good Governance demonstrates how weak institutional frameworks hinder long-term international cooperation.

Subnational diplomacy in Pacitan reveals structural constraints and a leadership model still focused on symbolic capital rather than diplomatic performance. To elevate Pacitan's role in international engagement, the following strategic recommendations are offered:

1. Foster Independent Local Leadership: Local leaders should build their legitimacy through achievements and innovation rather than relying on historical-political ties.

Leadership in Pacitan must evolve beyond the shadow of political lineage. It is not enough to rely on symbolic association with national figures. Local leaders must cultivate their own diplomatic capital by initiating policy innovation and international collaborations that reflect the regency's unique strengths such as its coastal resources, cultural heritage, and strategic geographic position near southern Java's economic corridors.

Without this internal drive, even the most well-intentioned diplomatic initiatives will fall short due to lack of sustained support. Political courage is needed to take the risk of rebranding the region's identity toward a more outward-looking and solution-oriented governance model.

2. Build Permanent Structures for International Engagement: The local government should establish a dedicated unit to manage foreign cooperation and international relations.

A key barrier to Pacitan's global role is the absence of a standing institutional mechanism that handles foreign affairs. The creation of an International Cooperation Unit preferably under the Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda) would ensure continuity, coordination, and coherence in cross-border initiatives.

This unit should not be ceremonial, but operational with regular reporting, performance indicators, and embedded professionals trained in international studies, public diplomacy, and external funding mobilization.

3. Reform Bureaucratic Governance Logic: Promote merit-based appointments and develop human resources with expertise in diplomacy and international affairs.

The inertia of Pacitan's bureaucracy lies in its resistance to reform. Promotion systems based on loyalty rather than merit discourage innovation. Establishing a talent pipeline for international engagement including young civil servants with global training experience will help professionalize the bureaucracy.

Exchange programs with other regencies or embassies, job-shadowing with donor agencies, and international internships should be institutionalized. When bureaucrats see their future tied to performance, the culture will shift from maintenance to development.

4. Empower Young People and Reconnect with Diaspora: Encourage young people's participation in global forums and leverage Pacitan's diaspora to promote cultural and economic diplomacy. Youth in Pacitan are increasingly mobile, tech-savvy, and globally connected yet rarely included in policymaking or development diplomacy. Local government should create youth-led forums, innovation hubs, and public competitions focused on building diplomatic skills, regional branding, more embrace many arts cultural things of Pacitan, etc. Similarly, Pacitan's diaspora in East Asia, the

Middle East, and Europe can be reconnected through digital town halls, business roundtables, or cultural ambassador programs. Diaspora networks are low-cost, high-return assets for promoting international visibility.

5. Leverage Digital Platforms for Global Promotion: Develop official digital platforms to highlight local talent and connect with national diplomatic networks. Digital diplomacy is one of the most simple but effective weapons for subnational diplomacy today. Pacitan must create an international-facing internet platform in English and Bahasa Indonesia to highlight its areas of expertise, such as sustainable tourism, arts and crafts, natural resources on land or at sea, and so on.

Social media teams, visual storytelling, and interactive investor guides can elevate the regency's profile. Moreover, responding to international inquiries or maintaining consistent communications with foreign embassies requires dedicated capacity and tools.

6. Pursue Thematic Regional and Global Cooperation: Focus on strategic areas such as climate diplomacy, disaster resilience, and geopark development.

Instead of attempting to join large multilateral forums that require significant resources, Pacitan can begin by engaging in thematic networks that align with its interests: coastal resilience, cultural heritage preservation, local entrepreneurship, and disaster risk reduction.

Examples include collaboration with small islands development programs, regional cultural festivals, or technical assistance networks. The key is to start small, consistent, and relevant not ambitious but unsustainable.

7. Revitalizing Pacitan's Subnational Diplomacy and Leadership for Meaningful International Engagement: To revitalize its global presence, the local government must take several strategic steps.

First, institutional strengthening is necessary through the allocation of diplomatic budgets, training in international cooperation, and data-driven governance. These measures will help move beyond ceremonial narratives and promote actionable diplomacy (Kusumasari.B, 2012).

Second, a more inclusive approach involving universities, civil society, MSMEs, and diaspora communities can expand diplomatic participation beyond the bureaucracy. Cities with active paradiplomacy often mobilize these networks to create sustainable international ties (OECD, 2019).

Third, Pacitan should learn from domestic subnational success stories. Banyuwangi has led digital diplomacy and ASEAN engagement; Yogyakarta has forged robust cultural ties; and NTB has advanced sustainability diplomacy (UNDP, 1997).

Additionally, sister city partnerships as seen in Surabaya–Kitakyushu and Yogyakarta Kyoto offer a cost-effective route for Pacitan to engage globally on shared challenges like coastal development, tourism, and education (OECD, 2019).

Together, these reforms can guide Pacitan from symbolic identity toward active and progressive subnational diplomacy.

By moving beyond symbolic leadership and investing in autonomous diplomatic identity through strategic initiatives such as building international partnerships, reforming local governance structures, and engaging youth and diaspora Pacitan Regency can emerge as a meaningful subnational actor in international relations.

This study has argued that the stagnation of Pacitan's subnational diplomacy reflects a deeper challenge beyond mere administrative oversight. It is the result of entrenched symbolic politics, absent institutional structures for diplomacy, and limited participation from youth and civil society. While some districts in Indonesia have moved forward to adopt international cooperation as part of local development, Pacitan has remained hesitant and internally oriented.

What distinguishes regions that thrive internationally is not simply funding or geographic advantage, but governance strategy. Pacitan has the assets coastal potential, diaspora, cultural heritage but lacks a policy framework to mobilize them. Without institutional innovations like a foreign cooperation office, diplomatic task force, or youth partnership program, the regency will remain excluded from emerging global networks of subnational influence (Rodrigo Tavares, 2016).

Recommendations proposed here from leadership reform to digital diplomacy and diaspora engagement are drawn from practical examples in similar Indonesian contexts. As Winarno. D, (2021) notes, successful city diplomacy often starts with political commitment, supported by minimal resources but high initiative. Establishing soft infrastructure such as language-skilled civil servants, transparent data systems, and policy openness can generate significant ripple effects.

Breaking from inherited symbolism is the core challenge. As Hadiz, (2010) explains, performance-based legitimacy must replace identity-based entitlement in local leadership if genuine reform is to take root. Until that shift occurs, initiatives for internationalization will remain tokenistic or short-lived.

Repositioning Pacitan as a globally engaged subnational actor is more than a branding exercise it is a governance transformation. This paper highlights that such a transformation is not only urgent but also possible, provided the political will, civic energy, and bureaucratic reform are aligned toward long-term international relevance.

The author wishes to emphasize that this journal is not written in opposition to any particular figure or political legacy. On the contrary, it is a form of scholarly engagement grounded in respect for past contributions. The critiques offered here are intended to assist local leaders including the regent, civil servants, and policymakers in reflecting on new strategies that could better serve the people of Pacitan. With a spirit of constructive dialogue, this paper invites local authorities to act with greater responsiveness and foresight for the long-term welfare of the regency and its communities.

This journal is a bold yet respectful critique of how symbolic and oligarchic politics may obstruct regional international engagement. Its strength lies in its original focus, strong theoretical base, and relevance to broader Indonesian governance debates. However, the journal would be much stronger if it incorporated more data-driven arguments, broadened the scope of actors beyond local leaders, and offered models of good practice as a policy alternative. Doing so would increase its utility not just for scholars, but for local governments seeking reform.

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